

# Repent, Turn Around. Are You Ready?

## December 6, 2020

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Grace, mercy, and peace to you this day from God, our Father, and from the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today on this second Sunday in the New Church Year and the second Sunday in Advent, we find ourselves in the "B" Year of the lectionary. For most of you, that is not of very much consequence, but for pastors it is. The Church, in its wisdom, decided to organize the readings for each Sunday around the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke with readings from the Gospel of John interspersed in all three and especially for the Easter season. The years are designated by the letters A for Matthew, B for Mark, and C for Luke. Today, we start in the B Year with the Gospel of Mark.

The Gospel of Mark is the shortest of the Gospels and moves through the life of Jesus quicker than the other three Gospels. You could probably read all 16 chapters of the book this afternoon with time to spare for a football game. I challenge you to do so. (And watch a football game!) Mark seems to create anxious and eager anticipation in his writing that stirs his readers to read eagerly and speedily through his Gospel. In his desire to get the story of Jesus told, that is to get to the heart of

the Gospel, St. Mark starts the first chapter with the words, ***“The beginning of the Gospel (the Good News) of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.”*** Notice how Mark is in such a rush to get to the Gospel that he doesn’t even write a complete sentence for the first chapter of his Gospel. But...what is even more interesting is who St. Mark starts writing about. Unlike St. Luke who starts his Gospel with the nativity, or St. Matthew who tells about the arrival of the Magi (The eastern wise men), or St. John who describes Jesus as the Word made flesh, St. Mark starts his story about Jesus by looking back all the way into the Old Testament to quote the prophet Isaiah, and then, as if you knew who he was writing about, he launches into a description of an eccentric prophet– John. And that is the beginning.

Then, St. Mark jumps ahead to the Baptism of Jesus, His Temptation, and the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. There is no flight to Egypt, there is no Jesus working in his step-father’s carpentry shop, no staying behind in the temple. John the Baptist and Jesus start the Gospel of St. Mark. While St. Mark seems in a rush to tell the real Gospel message of salvation by Jesus on the cross that he races through the story of Jesus. Yet he purposely devotes a few precious words to the story about John, known as the Baptist. What was St. Mark, under the inspiration of God, trying to get us to hear and see on this second Sunday in Advent? And what was so unique about John

the Baptist that Jesus said of him in Luke 7:28, ***“I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John.”***?

It might be worthwhile to take a deeper look at this John, called the Baptist, before we return to focus on Jesus. John was related to Jesus. They were cousins through their mothers and John was about six months older than Jesus. John was the son of a priest, Zechariah, and was a descendent of Aaron, the brother of Moses, because he was from the clan of Abijah. John probably should have followed in his father’s footsteps and become a priest in the temple. But John was probably raised as a Nazarite, a holy man pledged to the Lord because he was the result of prayer and faith by his parents who, until he was born, were without children. The strange behavior of John the Baptist is not so strange when you consider how and where he lived was exactly the same as the great Old Testament prophet, Elijah. Everything about him recalled the prophet Elijah. The mantle or cloak that he wore as an outer garment was worn by all Old Testament prophets starting with the prophet Elijah. It was woven from camel hair. Camel’s hair was coarse and thick and protected the animals from the heat of the sun during the day and the cold of the desert night. Like, Isaiah, John the Baptist lived in the wilderness. The "wilderness" or desert where John ministered was dry and uninhabited. The wilderness of Judea west and north of

the Dead Sea. The wilderness represented more than a solitary place to John. It was the place to which Elijah had fled, and the place where God led his people to the Promised Land. The wilderness was also a place where the Lord revealed himself on numerous occasions in Old Testament history. And the wilderness was where many Jews believed the Messiah would appear.

His diet consisted of dried "locusts" and the "honey" of "wild" bees. This was clean food for Jews according to dietary laws found in Leviticus 11:21-22. In the Near East, locusts are common in the diet, then and now, because they are high in vitamin content.

Everything about John the Baptist, his food, his clothing, his lifestyle, including his message which focused on two things: Repent and be baptized, indicated his rejection of official Israel at that time. Everything about John the Baptist supported his conviction that he was the prophet who would announce the Messiah, the Messiah who would come during his lifetime. The people had been waiting for over 6,000 years for their Messiah, their Savior, so John the Baptist created great excitement not only in his persona and behavior but also in his message. He was the last of the Old Testament prophets who were living in New Testament times. The people flocked to the desert to see and hear him because they believed the

Messiah was at hand. Maybe, he would come in the wilderness, the desert with John.

And, clearly, John was preparing them for the one who was coming. Actually, the one who had already come by this time. He wanted them to be ready. He wanted them to repent, which means turn around, and to be purified in the waters of baptism. He wanted them to be ready for the future of grace based on forgiveness and turn away from sinful lives based on legalism and work righteousness based on what they did and not on what God would do for them.

So, St. Mark highlighted this man, John the Baptist, and his message of repentance and baptism for us, today on the Second Sunday in Advent over 2,000 years later here in Virginia almost 6,000 miles and six time zones away from where he first delivered it. Like those New Testament people who were living in an Old Testament world, we need to turn around too. We need to look forward to the coming of Jesus. Not just in our celebration of His first coming, but in preparation for the certainty of His Second Coming. We need to turn our lives around from the sin that we commit. We need to turn from trying to earn our way to heaven and turn to face the one who earned it for us.

You say, *“Oh Pastor, I really believe in grace and I know that I am justified by grace through faith in Jesus.”* Right.

So, walking out of Walmart, you don't just drop a few coins in the red kettle, you drop in a dollar or two and think *"what a good boy or girl I am."* The one action negates the other and the sin is doubled.

John knew that his water baptism was a sign of a greater baptism. A baptism of the Holy Spirit that the Messiah would administer. John knew that he was preparing the unworthy people of Israel to receive their messianic King. He knew the act of baptism by and through Jesus was a true cleansing, a true washing.

Today, Jesus is coming, too and we need to prepare to meet Jesus as well. Today, Jesus is coming to us in His body and bread in this Holy Communion that we are about to receive. Are you prepared to meet Him? Have you turned around in your life or are you still clinging to your old sinful ways? And each of us needs to prepare to meet Jesus as we approach the end of our temporal lives which may be at any moment that God decides.

Finally, we all need to prepare to meet Jesus when He comes on the Last Day. Are you ready for either of these events for which no one knows the day or the hour either of our death or the end of temporal time? Are you ready?

Just as John pointed out at His first coming, preparing to meet Jesus required the people to be repentant and to be washed in His righteousness. But we can't wash away

our sins with a ritual. We can't overcome our sins with good works. All our preparations for our Savior cannot be the result of our actions at all. Repentance and baptism are both gifts of God.

John pointed out that his baptism was not worthy to be compared to the baptism of Jesus. John underlined the unworthiness of his actions when he said in comparison to Jesus, he was not even good enough to do the most menial and humbling thing for Jesus –to stoop down and untie his sandal. John knew that Jesus was the center of our forgiveness. John knew that Jesus is the one who washes the ugly, dirty sins off our feet, off our bodies, and from our hearts with His blood and puts a cloak of righteousness on our back so we can meet him. A cloak that protects us from sin, eternal death, and the devil.

We can best prepare for meeting Jesus today, in this Holy Communion, at that time when He comes to take us home to Him in heaven or when He comes in glory at the End of Time by focusing on Him – by turning around – by seeking the one who is our Savior and by accepting Him as the center of our lives. Doing so - focusing on Him will make all the other preparations for the celebration of His first coming more meaningful. Doing so will prepare us for whenever He comes to us in this world or at the end of it.

Today, John, the Baptist is speaking to you – repent - turn around. Today, turn away from your sins, receive the grace of your salvation in faith, and prepare to welcome Your Savior, Your Messiah, Your King, Your Jesus. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. And now, the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.

+ Soli Deo Gloria +